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Global Health

SUCCESS STORIES

HIV/AIDS

Miss Universe Uses Her Crown to Confront HIV/AIDS Stigma

IN JUSTINE PASEK'S NATIVE PANAMA, AIDS is a taboo topic. Although the disease first emerged there in 1984 and Panama currently harbors the second-highest HIV infection rate in Central America, open discussion of the disease is rare, and the stigma surrounding AIDS can be devastating. So when Pasek was crowned Miss Universe 2002, she was eager to use her new platform to help break the silence.

HIV/AIDS awareness is the official issue focus of the Miss Universe organization. Each young woman holding the Miss Universe crown works to educate the public about HIV/AIDS, and serves as the official spokesperson for the Global Health Council's International AIDS Candlelight Memorial campaign. The Memorial is held each year in May, and is supported by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

During her reign, Pasek's work with the Global Health Council included traveling to Kenya, Panama, Puerto Rico, and across the United States to promote awareness and counter the discrimination associated with HIV/AIDS. Along with serving as the 2003 Candlelight Memorial spokeswoman, Pasek filmed an HIV/AIDS public service announcement that has been shown throughout Central America. She also launched an HIV/AIDS testing center and telephone hotline at Panama City's only HIV/AIDS clinic, PROBISIDA.

While visiting Panama, Pasek invited local journalists to observe as she was tested for HIV. "I want to show the people of my country that everyone needs to be tested, even beauty queens. HIV doesn't care who you are or what you do," she noted. Photos of Pasek being tested were broadcast to millions of people throughout Central America.

"Even though my country has the second largest rate of HIV infection in Central America, no one talks about it."

– Justine Pasek,
Miss Universe 2002 and
native of Panama



Photo courtesy of Global Health Council

Pasek also appeared in Washington, D.C., on World AIDS Day to unveil the 2003 Candlelight Memorial campaign's official public service announcement and poster. The announcement, produced by the Global Health Council and titled "A Child's Poem—AIDS Is My Name," was filmed in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya, and features a poem recited by two young girls of the Masai tribe, whose community has been ravaged by AIDS.

Pasek told members of the media who attended the Candlelight Memorial that confronting HIV/AIDS had become her mission: "It is my job to travel throughout the world and use my voice to help remove the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, and to help educate individuals and governments about the largest epidemic in human history, even if they do not want to talk about it."

The Candlelight Memorial, which was held on May 18th this year, honors the memory of those lost to HIV/AIDS and shows support for those living with HIV/AIDS. More than 3,000 communities in 87 countries

Miss Universe 2002, Justine Pasek, speaks at a Panama City observance of the International AIDS Candlelight Memorial.

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marked the occasion with lighting ceremonies, exhibitions, forums, and performances to mobilize citizens in the fight against the pandemic.

Pasek led her own candlelight memorial in Panama City on May 18th, amid preparations for the 2003 Miss Universe pageant. She led fellow pageant delegates in a moment of silence for those who have died of AIDS, and urged her audience to be tested for HIV.

Panama, October 2003